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Through The Esses - Thank You Fredy Lienhard

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There has been no formal announcement that we know of. It isn't a sure thing either, according to someone who is close to him. But, the prospect of sportscar racing losing one of its most enduring and appreciated team owners - and capable drivers - has prompted us to take a few minutes now to say thank you, regardless of what his decision may be.

Thank you, Fredy Lienhard.

Lienhard heads up the Lista Company, a family owned operation that manufactures modular storage systems. His company name is most often heard in the context of Doran-Lista as in Doran-Lista Racing. Long a supportive

owner and racing partner to constructor Kevin Doran, Lienhard was the primary driving force behind some of that teams finest moments in open-top prototype sportscar racing over the last 10 or so years. And there were many fine moments.

Who can forget the Ferrari 333SP? That car practically resurrected professional prototype sportscar racing in North America from the time it debuted in the early 1990's. Doran-Lista Racing campaigned a 333SP to great success in the original IMSA/ Professional Sports Car and USRRC / Grand Am series. Often their primary competition came from the Riley & Scott MKIII chassis campaigned by another great sportscar owner/driver/legend, Rob Dyson. And in 1996, the chase was on from both Dyson and Wayne Taylor, who drove a Riley 'factory' MKIII that eventually won the championship.

These were heady days of prototype racing in North America, a time when the cars still looked like prototypes traditionally looked, and a time when several cars stood a good chance of winning at each race. Today the prototypes in Grand Am don't look at all like traditional prototypes, and the minimalist menagerie of prototypes competing in the ALMS are all at the unyielding mercy of the all-conquering Audi R8. No, it was a different time back then, and a man named Fredy Lienhard was right in the middle of it all.



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Lienhard often shared the driving duties with the “Belgian Bullet”, Didier Theys. While few would argue that Didier’s talent led to more success than were Lienhard to have co-driven with a clone of himself, the man was a respectable talent in his own right. He enjoyed victory at several races including one of the biggest in sportscar racing - the 2002 Rolex 24 hours (teamed with Theys, Mauro Baldi and Max Papis in the ‘hybrid’ Doran-Lista Dallara Judd). That same year he also teamed with Theys, and his son, Fredy Lienhard Jr. to win the Grand Am race at Mont-Tremblant. He has also co-driven to wins at Lime Rock, Watkins Glen and Road America.

Lienhard represents so much of what ‘traditional’ sportscar racing team owners have always been about. Men like Briggs Cunningham and Gianpiero Moretti (the man who persuaded Ferrari to build the 333SP in the first place) and Rob Dyson. These are men who combined several elements: their lofty ambitions of podium familiarity, a desire to compete and win, and – in smaller measure – to achieve fan and peer recognition, and a healthy dose of business acumen, to achieve positive and rewarding results. These men often put two and two together and got five – just a bit more than was expected. They were sportsmen who knew how to win, at whatever cost.

When Grand Am announced that they were going with an all new non-traditional approach to ‘prototype’ racing, Kevin Doran could see the potential for growing his business as a chassis constructor. To date, he has sold a number of cars to several teams, and they have enjoyed a measure of success in this second season of the new beginning for sportscar racing in North America. But Doran put his first JE 4 Daytona Prototype on the track for Forest Barber, not Fredy Lienhard. While the car debuted a bit prematurely, having teething problems at the 2003 Rolex 24, Fredy Lienhard could see there might be a place for a Doran-Lista entry in this new world and so he and Doran set about getting a car ready for one more, perhaps, brilliant season in the sportscar sun.

That car debuted in August of the 2003 season, at Watkins Glen. It finished 3rd in class and overall, an excellent showing for a brand new entry. In the 17 races since that debut – through the end of this season - the Toyota/Lexus Doran-Lista #27 would go on to take just one more win and land on the podium just four times. Modest results for a team that was as professional in its approach and execution as any other top team, and certainly a huge measure above most of the rest. The kind of professional racing operation that reflected Fredy Lienhard’s desire to go racing the right way – to win.

And for this new beginning - in a new car, and a new class, and a new series - Fredy Lienhard, the former Formula Vee racer, highly successful businessman, and winning team owner, decided not to put on his helmet.

Things had changed. This time around the world of sportscar racing was not what it used to be.

The Grand Am ‘formula’ had originally enticed many would-be Fredy Lienhard’s – owner/drivers - onto the grid. The incredible growth rate of the Daytona Prototype class is proof of that. But, with the establishment of competent and professional race teams like Chip Ganassi Racing, Howard-Boss Motorsports and the Wayne Taylor/Bill Riley SunTrust effort, to name a few, the level of competition has been lifted to a new height. And with so many more new teams seemingly coming out of garages across North America with each passing week, the performance bar will probably be raised even higher.

It takes having a pair of professional drivers on the track at all times to win in Grand Am today. Other owners - like Forest Barber, for example - have acknowledged that and have loosened their grip on the wheel to let the hired guns like Christian Fittipaldi and Terry Borcheller chase

the checkers. It has become the only way to win. And once the new teams start filling in their available seats with talented and professional drivers, it will be next to impossible for an owner/driver to enjoy the thrill of victory that men like Lienhard have experienced in the past.

Even Rob Dyson knows that he best serves the team today from the sidelines and not on the track. And we suspect that Fredy Lienhard has reached that same point in his racing life. The question for both of them now becomes, will they feel the same desire to participate if they are not going to be in the car at speed?

We have heard no one talk of Dyson calling it a day. We fervently hope that he continues to take the fight to the Audis in the ALMS. (And that he will be victorious!) And we certainly hope that Fredy Lienhard too has only just hung up his helmet and driving suit, but not his heart for the sport. We hope he continues to support and work with Kevin Doran to help reverse the fortunes of the JE4 of recent races. We further hope he continues to stay on the 'prototype' racing scene for a long time to come.

But if he is to bid goodbye to this sport to which he has contributed so much, we hope he knows how sincerely we will miss him and how much we appreciate his having been so deeply involved in perpetuating the sport. There can be no dispute that his approach to racing, his commitment to his team, and his desire to excel, was an exemplary model for all future teams and team owners to emulate.

Looking ahead to a time when we all have a few more pounds to carry around, and our vision numbers start getting further and further away from 20-20, and our propensity for self propulsion is exceeded by our desire to sit just a while longer, we will remember Fredy Lienhard. We will remember him just as warmly as we remember Briggs Cunningham and Gianpiero Moretti today and will (eventually) remember Rob Dyson.

But, this professional procrastinator would sure like to postpone that rocking chair trip down memory lane for at least one more season. One more year of seeing Fredy Lienhard's Lista logo emblazoned on the side of a Kevin Doran sportscar. Times may have changed, but that logo links the present to the past. We want to know that logo has a future in sportscar racing in North America.

But if the logo is to go away, we wish Fredy Lienhard all the best. He always gave us his.

